2007

Van Kalsbeek, John

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Narrator's name: John Van Kalsbeek
Length of interview: 99:07
Date of interview: 2007
Place of interview: Northwestern's campus
Interviewer's name: Breanne Van Wyk
For: Northwestern College, History 351: America and the Vietnam War

BV: This is Breanne Van Wyk and I am interviewing John Van Kalsbeek at Northwestern's campus. It is for part of a class entitled "The United States of America and the Vietnam War." Let's start out by your full name and where you were born.

JV: John Van Kalsbeek. I was born in Orange City and born and raised around Hospers. When we got married, I moved to Orange City and been here ever since.

BV: Very good. So did you graduate high school from Hospers?

JV: From Western Christian.

BV: Western Christian. Did you have any siblings growing up?

JV: I had two older brothers and one younger brother, four boys in the family.

BV: No sisters?

JV: No sisters, no.

BV: What did your parents do?

JV: Farmed.

BV: Farmed?

JV: Yes. We lived on the farm between Hospers and Sheldon.

BV: Did either of your older brothers go to Vietnam at all?

JV: No, I was the only one.

BV: Were you drafted?

JV: Yes. I enlisted in the Air Force and transferred to Vietnam after time in the Air Force. My call of duty came for Vietnam so that's what happened.

BV: Very good. Just quickly, what division, branch, unit, brigade?

JV: I was in the 185th security police squadron in the Air Force. So I was in the security police and of course the Air Force is divided up into all different segments, you might say, divisions. I was in the security police.

BV: What exactly did they do?

JV: Well, if you are here in the States, then it's more patrolling bases and that kind of stuff, law enforcement. When I was in Vietnam I was guarding the base, sitting in towers and bunkers and roving patrols and that kind of stuff. Most all my work was done at night. There really wasn't too much going on during the daytime and everything happened at night.

BV: I guess, like protecting against the VC[1]?

JV: Yes. Our base was the runway like this [gestures] then we had all bunkers facing out. Then we sit in these bunkers at night. The bunkers here and there's dogs walking between you here and then there's a concertina fence out here where they'd have to come through and then there's mines out here further out so when they started if they made it across the mines then they could come up to the fence, if they made it across the fence then they came to us.

BV: How often did that happen?

JV: Quite often.

BV: For your present life, do you have kids, married?

JV: Yes, I have three kids, my oldest one lives in Sioux Falls, married and has four kids. My daughter lives in Sioux Center; she's married and has three kids. My youngest lives in Sioux City and he's married and has one child.

BV: A lot of grandkids! [Laughs]

JV: All three graduated from Northwestern here.

BV: Really? Cool. When did you first hear about Vietnam, when you were growing up? Or just kind of a general thing?

JV: Of course the Vietnam war was going on quite a few years before I went but I would say maybe when I was 15-16 was when I really started realizing, paying

[1] The Vietcong were forces in South Vietnam allied with the North Vietnamese and were also known as the National Liberation Front or the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam. The military phonetic for VC is Victor Charlie, and Charlie became a nickname for the Vietcong troops (Coffey).

more attention to the war. I guess before that you hear about those kind of things but it just doesn't…

BV: Doesn't register?

JV: No, not quite as much. You know what's going on and then you hear of different ones going and that's when it starts to strike home a little bit. And then the older you get the more you realize that you could be one of them.

BV: Did you know about a lot of people who went? Friends?

JV: Yes. I stayed in contact with different ones and there were people from my base that I knew but the biggest majority of them I didn't know. You got to know them and actually working with them, being with them. Some good, some bad but basically they are all in the same situation so they all work together.

BV: Did you have any family members who had ever served in a war previously?

JV: No, not really. All four of us boys was in the service, but I was the only one who went to Vietnam. Anywhere's from California to Germany, Texas and that kind of stuff. In the military you get moved around a little bit. You're on this base and then they transfer you to that base, you know. Also when one of the family is in the war zone then that's it. No more from the family go there. After you come home then the next one can go or something like that. My two older brothers, especially my oldest one, he was in and out before the Vietnam War. Then the second one was in the same time I was in about, he was safe for that year. Then later on my younger brother was in the army and he went to Germany but he didn't have to go to Vietnam.

BV: They got lucky! [Laughs]

JV: Yes, I was the black sheep I guess.

BV: How did your parents take it then?

JV: It was hard on them. In those days, it wasn't the cell phones and the telephone and that kind of stuff. I was married when I went to Vietnam. I probably talked to my wife two times or three times in the year except for the week of R & R[2]. You'd call through a ham operator[3] it was called. So I would say something to this guy, this guy would say it to my wife, my wife would say it to him and then it would come back to me.

BV: Not any personal conversations! [Laughs]

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[2] Military acronym for rest and recuperation or rest and recreation.
[3] Ham was a slang term for a radio operator.

JV: No, and it's not that you can just do this any time of the day or when you wanted to, it was the frequencies. When the frequency was right, then they could call. Sometimes it would be 12:00 noon. So you get there and you're standing in line and you're standing there for three hours and all of a sudden you lose everything and you couldn't talk. I tried it a couple times and it really didn't work out very well. You get off there and you felt worse than you did before so really why do it?

BV: Did your wife have to be there to answer? Did you ever have that, that she wasn't there?

JV: What was that?

BV: To answer the phone?

JV: Oh yeah! That was another problem, the time difference was-I don't know-13 hours or something like that. So if I heard it at 12:00 noon that the frequency was good, then it's 1 o'clock in the morning, so that didn't work out so well. Then at night I worked, so it didn't work out to call to talk during the day time. So it really didn't work out very well and I purposely didn't do much of it.

BV: Did you write letters then?

JV: Oh yes, we wrote continuously so that was good. And then we did get to go to Hawaii on R&R. I think about 7 months after I was there I flew from Vietnam to Hawaii and she flew from here to Hawaii and we spent a week together and then we left again.

BV: Did you have any kids at that point?

JV: No, in fact we got married in October and then in January I was notified that we were called up or had to go. Then in May we left.

BV: So you enlisted in the…

JV: Air Force.

BV: Air Force. Did you encounter anyone who was trying to dodge drafts?

JV: Yeah, there was some from town here, I'm not quite sure how they just got out of it. Some kind of a hardship or something with your parents or I don't know if it was their wife, but there was some that got out of it.

BV: What was the basic local perception of the war when you went?

JV: Well I think it's something like Iraq now. Why are we there? Why don't we just send everybody home and let them fight their own fight? I think it got worse as it

went on, it's kind of like Iraq. At first I think people believe that's what we have to do. We have to go there and try to straighten this out. After about so long it didn't seem to get any better. Pretty soon you think, "Why can't we just come home instead of losing all our lives over there, what are we gaining," and that kind of stuff.

BV: You were there at really high emotion times.

JV: Yes, earlier it wasn't quite as bad and as it went on it got worse. Slowly on, it did get better. We was kind of in the bad time, I think.

BV: What attracted you to the Air Force? Had you ever flown planes before?

JV: No, you just kind of have to pick something. I guess I'm really not quite sure why I enlisted in the Air Force but basically you have to pick something. I don't know, maybe I thought the army is more out in the fields continuously. Marines is out in the fields. Navy is out in the water. Air Force is in the air, not that you're in the air all the time. For me, I didn't have that much to do with planes besides guard them. We did, not that I flew a plane, but I did quite a bit of flying in planes and helicopters and stuff. One thing that I did a lot was when you come to Vietnam you transfer your money over to their money. It's called PVC or PMC or something like that[4]. From our air base we would have to bring that money to Da Nang[5]? And then they needed guards on the plane to guard the money. I'd say probably once, at least once a week or more I'd be on an airplane guarding the money, going to Da Nang. So I did get to do quite a bit of flying, not that I drove the plane or flew the plane.

BV: What did you all do for training? Did you have to go through basic training?

JV: Yes, you kind of build up to this. When you join the Army or join the Air Force, the first thing you do is go to basic. My basic was in Texas. You first go through, I think, it's about 6 months of basic and that's kind of gruesome, I mean the things they make you do. A lot of it was ridiculous, but it was learning to obey orders. Just anything. Tonight you wax the floor and tomorrow night you take a razor blade and you scrape it off. One time they found a laundry tag in my uniform. You bring your uniform to a laundry and they ask for the last 4 numbers of your serial. They put it on the card. So I didn't take that out and they found the tag in my collar. So we had a military funeral. I had to dig a grave, six feet deep and four feet wide. We had to bury that little tag in the hole and cover it up. You learn to take orders, no matter what you think, you just say yes sir and no sir and that's it.

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[4] Van Kalsbeek is likely referring to military payment certificates, or MPC. This currency is issued by the Department of Defense, and it could be converted to local currency when on leave and to American dollars when leaving an MPC zone ("Military Payment Certificate").

[5] The 2nd largest city in Vietnam, Da Nang was the headquarters of the South Vietnamese Army and served as a large military base for U.S. forces.

BV: Was that hard at times?

JV: Yes, it was. They call you names and they try to cut you down and they just try to break you but all you got to do is look them in the eye and "Yes sir" and "No sir" and that's it. No matter what they say, you agree. If you can keep your mouth shut and just agree with them and do what they want, you get along better.

BV: Were there some who couldn't?

JV: Yes, there were some who had nervous breakdowns or emotionally they couldn't take it. They'd go to the dispensary and medicine and hospital and eventually if it was bad enough they'd send them home and probably had a medical discharge or something like that. It's not that you got that real easy. It's not that you can fake it and get sent home. I think that it would actually be worse to have a medical discharge because these guys couldn't take it and you could see them laying at night crying and just going berserk and so. I wouldn't wish that on anybody either.

BV: Did you see the same thing like that in action? While you were in Vietnam?

JV: Yes, I saw that in Vietnam too, a number of times where what happened the night before, it really bothered them.

BV: Did you have any other training besides that, for the Air Force?

JV: After basic then I went to the security police school.

BV: How long did that last?

JV: It was another six months.

BV: Where was it?

JV: That was in Texas too. I did stay right in Texas for both my trainings which sometimes is unusual. Usually you go to basic and when you do get in a different branch and they send you to California or Wyoming, but it just so happened that the security police school was in Texas too.

BV: Did you get to stay with any of the same guys that you went to basic training with?

JV: Actually, it was 2 guys out of 100 that went to security police. You just get divided all different ways. There's thousands and thousands of guys. Very seldom do you really stay with the same person very long.

BV: What was the quality of instruction?

JV: Well, I think after you look back, I think it was good. At the time it was very harsh. I guess the swearing and all that kind of stuff to get their point across, I thought it was a little bit overboard. They just really had to cut you down and really try to make a fool out of you. I thought probably if they would be more like teachers it would be better than the way they have it. It's different now than it was then. Now I do think that it's more that way where they try to get along with enlistees and that kind of stuff.

BV: Do you think some of it was necessary maybe for action?

JV: Yes, I do think that to take the real soft, mild-mannered kid and to send him off to war, that wouldn't be good either.

BV: Wouldn't prepare him?

JV: No, you have to learn to be a fighter and to stand on your own two feet and especially when you got there, it was either shoot or be shot. It was different and I think they did prepare you for that.

BV: Now for your time in Vietnam: Can you describe your trip over to Vietnam and your first impression of it? Like where you flew into?

JV: I flew on a cargo plane and it was a C-141, that was the name of it, the type of plane. It was just a plain cargo plane. You sat in a canvas seat. You sat in the plane backwards. Of course there's no stewardess, no lunches or anything like that. We did do a lot of stopping to the cargo planes, not that they could fly that far. Right now you can fly from Minneapolis to Japan or something like that. So we stopped in California and we stopped in Wake Island in the Philippines and Guam and then I think it was Vietnam. It was kind of like a two day trip to get there. Long trip, no sleeping. When you landed different places like the islands, it would be warm. It would be 80 degrees and when you get up in the air, there's no insulation in there so it's cold and you have gloves and winter coats and winter hats. When you start going down you start getting hotter and hotter and sweatier and sweatier. It wasn't a real pleasant trip over. We landed at Phu Cat Air Force base and that's where I spent the year.

BV: The whole time?

JV: Yes, I was on that base the whole year, and that was our job to do guard the runway on that base for the year.

BV: When exactly did you get there?

JV: May 5 or something like that. That was in 1968.

BV: Was it a big base? A lot of people?

JV: Yes, and I don't really know how many people. We had F-100[6] fighter planes. That's what we guarded; I would say there was at least a hundred of them or more, fighter planes. I would say there had to be at least 30,000 people on the base. It's a lot of movement in and out. The planes would land and so many people would come in and so many would leave again and that kind of stuff.

BV: There weren't very many fighter planes, were there, in the Vietnam War?

JV: There is different kinds. There's fighter planes, like we had the F-100s, but also there was like the planes that came from Guam, what do they call them again? They didn't stay in Vietnam. They would fly from Guam and then go over and drop the bombs and then fly back again. There was a lot of Air Force artillery, you might say. Not that everything stayed there, they would fly back to different islands to get out of the way. At night you would hear these planes coming over and down the line you could hear the bombs going off. They would fly at 30,000 feet and drop the bombs. They were safe. The B-52s, they called them[7].

BV: What other kind of planes, did you have helicopters?

JV: Helicopters, there were quite a few of those on our base. The C-131, that's another plane that had the propellers, they had the guns out the side of the planes. They would fly in kind of a straight line and they would have the guns firing down on the ground.

BV: A lot of them were used for bombs and artillery. Were any of them used to transport troops?

JV: Yes, a lot of that too. There wasn't so many air bases in Vietnam. If they had to get from our base to another base, whether it was Army or Marines or whatever, they would land there and load up and then go onto to the next base. Helicopters was a lot of it too, used to transport people.

BV: Did you have a lot of cargo too?

JV: Yes, a lot of fuel and a lot of bombs and of course all your equipment, food, jeeps or whatever you needed, that all had to be flown in. A lot of it would come by ship across and then unloaded off the ship and then fly elsewhere.

BV: Where was your base about? [Slides a map to John]

JV: [Looking at the map]. You have a pretty little map here. [Laughs]

BV: [Laughs] Yes, it's dark!

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[6] The F-100, also called the Super Sabre, was a supersonic plane that could be airborne without a runway.
[7] B-52s were heavy jet bombers responsible for dropping bombs from the air (Boyne).

JV: I'm thinking Phu Cat is right in here.

BV: Right along the South China Sea.

JV: Yes, we was just a couple miles from the South, the name is probably here, but it is a little bit in.

BV: Is it a river or a road?

JV: A road I think. On a bigger map, Qui Nhon[8], that's the name of the city that we were just 20 miles from, that was the third largest city in South Vietnam.

BV: So it was a very big base?

JV: Yes, it was a big base.

BV: Can you walk me through an ordinary day?

JV: An ordinary day, you start out-everything was at night. In the daytime we would sleep. Basically it was so hot that you really couldn't sleep very much. You'd go to bed and when you'd come in, in the morning, you'd clean your rifles and stuff like that, and get unpacked. You'd probably go to bed at say 9 o' clock or something. Then you would probably sleep until 12 o'clock or 1 o clock or 3 o' clock if you were lucky. Of course there was no air conditioning or anything so it was hot. It was really unbearable. You kind of hang around in the daytime a little bit. Then at night you'd get something to eat and you'd start getting ready to go out when it started towards dark. You pretty much had to be out in the field when it was dark. You pretty much stayed there until morning.

We had different jobs, we had bunkers and I can even show you some of that on the pictures there. You had bunkers you would sit in and that was kind of close to the ground. We had towers that was up in the air a ways. Then you can look down at your area. Then we had roving patrols, you'd have say 15 people on a truck. One tower would call in and he was having trouble and they would send this, they called a Quebec[9] team, and the team would go out there and they would go out in the field and find out what the problem was and clear the area. Some nights you probably wouldn't get called at all. You could sit in the back of the truck and wait. Nothing happened. The next night you was probably out most of the night through the rice paddies or the fields.

BV: And you were pretty far out then?

[8] The U.S. Air Force built a large base just south of Qui Nhon (Corfield).
[9] Uncertain of this meaning. Quebec is the code word for Q, so it's possible it's referring to the letter Q.

JV; Yes. Just say this is the base here like this [Pointing] so we had to keep everything clear, not just right there on the base but probably 5 miles out. Keep it, you don't let them get within 100 feet of the base.

BV: Like gunfire travels. [Laughs]

JV: Right.

BV: Did you do all those things? Being in the tower and the jeep? Did you rotate?

JV: Yes, we'd rotate. You'd get one night off in twelve, then every night you'd kind of have a rotation. They'd tell you what your job was for the night. So many people was on this side the base, so many people on that side. So many was on the Quebec team, so you always had a job of some sort. Naturally some was better than others. You rotated so you wouldn't be stuck with the bad job all of the time and the good job some of the time. And you pretty much knew which one was good and which one was bad. And there was always certain sides of the base that was worse than others. On this corner was the bomb dump where they stored all the bombs. That would be one place where they'd try to get in and blow up bombs. If they blow up the bombs, that would be real…

BV: Blow up the base?

JV: Yes, and it would be real advantageous to them if they blew up the bombs over there instead of dropped them on the people out in the field. Then another corner was the fuel dump where they store all the fuel to fly the planes. If you didn't have fuel, you couldn't fly planes so that was another place that they tried to get in. So some areas was worse than other areas.

BV: They didn't directly try to attack the aircraft very often?

JV: Probably not as much as these certain areas. If you blew up one plane, yeah that was bad, but if you blew up the bombs, the plane was kind of useless without bombs and if you blew up the fuel dump, then all the planes couldn't fly.

BV: How many people were working on the security?

JV: I would say between 500-800 guys, something like that, on our base.

BV: About how many each night?

JV: Most of them, there would probably be 50 guys off a night or something like that.

BV: So, a lot of security.

JV: There actually wasn't nothing to do at night when you did have off, but it was great to have a night off, that's not it. So they basically worked 12 nights on and one night off.

BV: That's some long hours too.

JV: Yes, basically from when the sun went down at night until it came up in the morning. Yes, it was some long nights. You sit in this bunker and you just kind of stare out into the dark. If you heard something or seen something, you sit in a chair once for 10 hours looking out in the dark…

BV: Did you get a chance to talk to your fellow servicemen?

JV: We keep in contact with some of the guys. We have gotten together a few times but they are all kind of all over the United States too. That's been 40 years ago so some of them are gone too already.

BV: So we had an example of an ordinary day. What's an example of an extraordinary day?

JV: Some nights there isn't too much action, some nights there is. The nights with a full moon, you can see pretty well at night when it's a full moon and it's clear. Then there usually isn't too much going on or not as much. When it's cloudy or not a full moon, that's when the action comes.

BV: So you kind of knew when to expect it?

JV: Yes, good time of the month and a bad time of the month. Generally towards morning, way after midnight, 3 o'clock in the morning or something like that.

BV: You mentioned how you didn't get very much sleep and how it was really hot all the time. Was it hard to keep up morale?

JV: Yes, there were high times and low times you might say. When people got tired and stressed and stuff like that it affected people. You kind of know yourself, when you don't get enough sleep and are overworked, it is hard on a person. The heat was bad at certain times of the year. Then also, there was about 3 months of monsoon when it rained a lot. That was another bad time. Everything was water, everything was mud. You're wet all the time.

BV: Did it make your job worse or harder too?

JV: Yes it did. Walking through rice paddies, walking in the mud, the water is always 2-3 feet deep. You're wet all night and you're half cold. Even in 70 degrees it was cold after so long. At first you was kind of relieved when the heat left and the rain,

after so long you wished it would dry up and be warmer again. Just being wet all the time, your feet… You are walking in wet shoes and wet socks all night long.

BV: I've heard about dry rot or foot rot[10], did you ever experience that or know any cases?

JV: What they call the creeping crud was another phrase for it. That came more when it was dry and your sweat pores would get plugged and the ground was so dry and so dusty and it would get in your sweat pores and you couldn't sweat. You'd get a rush and they called it creeping crud. That was really common.

BV: That doesn't sound very comfortable! [Laughs]

JV: No, it wasn't. You could shower and wash and shower and wash, but you needed more than that to get your sweat pores open again. And you went from that into the monsoon, there was real bad people's feet and stuff. There really was no way around it because you'd be clean and dry and 15 minutes later you were soaked. You'd have the ponchos and stuff to wear, but that didn't really keep it out either, especially when you walked through rice paddies.

BV: Those rice paddies are pretty deep water, aren't they?

JV: Yes, generally 2-3 feet deep and then you kind of sink in the mud.

BV: So you go in farther?

JV: Yes, it wasn't real pleasant.

BV: Were there any other common ailments?

JV: Malaria,[11] and it was advised to take a malaria pill every two weeks or something like that. And I did, and I didn't have no problem with it. There was people that caught malaria and was in the hospital for a while. I guess, not that it's good, but at least you could probably lay high and dry in a hospital bed for a few weeks or however long it took. I guess it wasn't all bad.

BV: Get rid of the dry rot maybe, or the creeping crud! [Laughs]

JV: Yes. [Laughs]

Short break requested by the narrator.

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[10] Trench foot, as this condition is also known, results from prolonged exposure to water. Symptoms include swelling of the feet, blistering, and sores ("Trench foot").

[11] Malaria was a serious problems during Vietnam; it was severe and resistant to drug therapy, plus servicemen did not always take the preventive medicine (McCallum).

BV: Can you describe your first day in Vietnam, or your first night more like?

JV: Well the first day and night is more orientation. We had a week of orientation, showing us around the base but also showing us what to do and what not to do. Also showing us what to do and what not to do and get us familiar with the field part of it, the bunkers and the towers and that part of it. So the first week was orientation you might say.

BV: As you went on, were you assigned certain jobs that weren't as dangerous? I've heard of short talk, the people getting short, did you have any?

JV: Yes, there actually was some jobs better than others. About the last three months I was in charge of work detail. I would go to town, to Qui Nhon. We had about 30 Vietnamese that worked for us. I was in charge of that. We set up mines around the base. Fencing, concertina fencing and flares and stuff like that. The last three months was better duty than the first nine months. That was a real welcome for me because that was more daytime work and actually wasn't as dangerous as being out in the field.

BV: You got more sleep?

JV: Yes, more sleep. It was better the last three months, it was more feasible.

BV: Did they do that with most men?

JV: Yes, if they could. I'd say the first two-thirds, three-fourths of the duty was the worst. As you got down to the end, they tried to give you a better job if it was at all possible.

BV: You mentioned that you worked with the Vietnamese to set up mines. Did you have any other contact with them?

JV: Yes, see we actually had quite a few Vietnamese working on our base. They worked for the government, in fact anywhere from washing clothes to cleaning your barracks to do work outside, help build dorms or that kind of stuff. We was in contact with the Vietnamese continuously.

BV: Did they come from the surrounding area then, or did they live on the base?

JV: No, from surrounding area. They really weren't allowed on the base at night. It's hard to distinguish the Vietnamese from the Vietcong. They kind of worked for money, as far as they would help out the Americans and they'd help out the Vietcong. When they was on base, they'd be working for us, but I think they would get information and that kind of stuff and give it to the Vietcong. To me it wasn't a real good situation. Sometimes I think that's how a lot of information leaked out. So where does the generals, where does the pilot sleep? Where are they located? So

when they want to bomb the base, you get rid of the pilots, that's more important than the policemen or the firemen. There was some of that.

BV: Was there a lot of suspicion then by the Americans?

JV: Yes. Supposedly they were questioned and checked and all this kind of stuff but that didn't work either. They can lie just as well as anybody else and they knew how to, they had to make a living. You felt sorry for these people, just as well as anybody else because it's just like if you had a war here in Orange City, it's every person for himself. It was hard for them to make a living, it was a very poor country, very poor people. You could get paid from the Americans for doing something and then in turn the Vietcong would pay you for certain information. That's how they lived, just try to survive. If you saw their homes and their shacks and stuff like that, what they lived in, it was pitiful.

BV: Yes, because most of them were farming communities, right? So were a lot of their rice paddies overtaken?

JV: Yes. A lot of stuff was just ruined. The bombs would drop on their rice paddies just as well as anything else and it's gone. Their livestock or whatever.

BV: Was there ever a situation where someone was found out to be VC on the base?

JV: Oh yes, I personally had people working for me during the daytime, and they were killed at night. That same person. It was very hard to trust anybody. Kind of the old saying that you love many but trust few. It was certainly the case there.

BV: What actions were taken when they found out they were VC?

JV: I really don't know. They would be arrested and taken off from there, you don't know. Maybe they were just turned loose again, I don't know.

BV: Do you know where they went?

JV: No, the Americans would take them off, I really don't know.

BV: What was your impression of the political and military leadership while you were over there?

JV: I think the military leadership was, as far as I knew, was fine. The political, I think it's kind of like Iraq here. A lot of it is political. Whether they did it for the money part of it, for oil reasons or why, I'm not quite sure. I mean, why did the war drag on for so long. It seemed like it didn't accomplish anything. We would hear B-52s go over at night. I don't know if you are acquainted with it, but they are big planes. They load the bombs. Every night they would go over and they'd go about so far and you'd hear the bombs go off. It seemed like night after night after night they'd

just drop the bombs in the same place. Man, these bombs would blow Orange City off the map. As many bombs as they dropped, it seemed like the whole Vietnam would be gone, but it just goes on night after night after night. So why? Was it all political? Do they have to fly so many missions at night, and you have to drop so many bombs? It just seemed like you didn't gain nothing. My feelings, and a lot of other people too. It seemed so useless. We didn't gain anything from one month to the next month. But still thousands and thousands of bombs are being dropped.

BV: While you were over there, the Operation Rolling Thunder[12] ended right?

JV: I heard of it, but I'm really not acquainted with it. Was it like a Tet Offensive[13] or something like that?

BV: It was an operation where the policy was to drop as many bombs as possible. I have a note here, it ended while you were over there I believe.

JV: Okay. Well, that could easy be. Kind of what I was talking about, you'd hear plane after plane after plane after plane go over and drop bombs. It just seemed like it was up in the hills someplace where it didn't seem to do any good. You would think that after you'd drop so many bombs, there's nothing left, but it goes night after night after night, they did that.

BV: It sounds like it's really an incapturable enemy.

JV: They could really dig their way through things. They could hide, they could dig, they were smart in certain areas. It seemed like there was always somebody to replace them. You'd find their canals or caves and that kind of stuff and you'd blow it all up and it seemed like the next night they were back in business.

Life was cheap over there. They talk about the suicide bombers in Iraq. There was a lot of that there too. It was the same thing as far as, they would strap things on their back and so tonight they wanted to try to get to the bomb dump. Just say 15 guys would come with charges on their back and if they got into the bomb dump, they would pull the cord. The bomb would go off – they called them satchel charges – they would set the bomb off. And one bomb would go on and on and on. If they didn't get that far, they would get killed before they got there.

BV: Would the bomb still go off then?

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[12] This operation was an extended period of bombing by the U.S. Air Force. Last over 3 years, the strategy wiped out much of North Vietnam's infrastructure plus killed over 50,000 North Vietnamese yet failed to achieve its political goals (Tilford).

[13] In January of 1968, the North Vietnamese launched an attack on South Vietnam during an agreed cease-fire for the Tet holiday. The surprise attack is often considered a turning point in the Vietnam War; Americans began to lose their support for and belief in the war. (Land)

JV: Yes. If they were shot a lot of times, the bomb on the back would go off too. That's a lot of dedication. When you left at night, you knew that you were going to be killed one way or the other.

BV: That's hard.

JV: Yes, you know you put yourself in that situation, you do that for your country or your college or whatever. You see a lot of that in Iraq with the car bombing and stuff like that, wasn't nothing new over there.

BV: Since you dealt a lot with Air Force, did you have a lot to do with napalm[14] or Agent Orange[15] or any chemicals like that?

JV: Agent Orange, at least with what I saw of it, was something that you sprayed on the foliage and then everything died and then that way you could keep a better control over who entered. There was a lot of trees and brush and shrubs and that kind of stuff, and they would go over with planes and spray that and then everything would just die off. Basically quite a bit of bare ground. So when you are sitting out in your bunkers and you looked out, naturally you can see a lot better what was out there if it was just flat ground then if it was just trees and brush and stuff. I guess that's pretty dangerous stuff. Now they have cases where people who was in contact with Agent Orange get some… I seen quite a bit of that, not that I got in contact with that but it was right around us.

BV: Did any of the people that you kept in contact with?

JV: No, not that you can really specifically blame it onto the Agent Orange. That was good.

BV: Did you know, when you were over there, its effects?

JV: No, it's just like now you spray your lawn for weeds.

BV: Same kind of thing?

JV: So they would spray there and thought that was normal. And I guess that happens with so much stuff, you don't realize it til years later that it really wasn't too healthy for you.

BV: The cause?

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[14] Napalm is an incendiary gasoline-based compound. In the Vietnam War, the United States dropped napalm bombs both to clear land and to attack opponents. However, napalm is difficult to pinpoint, and napalm bombs injured and killed many civilians. While many in America were opposed to the use of napalm, it was used throughout the war (Schuck).

[15] Agent Orange was a heribicide used to kill foliage, providing greater visibility and easier movement. As Van Kalsbeek notes, it had lingering side effects (Williams).

JV: Yes.

BV: Did you have a lot of contact with media at all?

JV: No. I mean not that they would come to our base. You would hear a few things. We had a little portable TV or a little transistor radio. No, basically, good or bad, you really didn't hear much. And you would kind of hear some things that happened back home, I mean if there was a protest back home, somebody would send a news clipping. So probably two weeks later you would hear about it over there. Not that you would sit there and watch TV and see what was going on back home the same day that it was happening here. Not that.

BV: Were there reporters present?

JV: No. I wouldn't say never, but it's not like in Iraq, the reporters are right with the men out in the field, no we didn't have that. And I don't think that's good. I don't think these reporters should be there and show them back home here what's going on. It's not a game.

BV: The Vietnam War was the first televised war.

JV: Even now when they start something, the reporters are right there showing the bombs going off in the distance. I don't really think that's necessary.

BV: Were there any wounded in the security force?

JV: Yes.

BV: Were you ever wounded?

JV: No.

BV: Got lucky. What were the common wounds?

JV: Gunshots. It's the most common. Sometimes it could be something that blew off and had pieces of steel or something like that that hit a person. The bullets were the biggest thing.

BV: Did you have a hospital right on the base?

JV: Yes, it was the smaller type medical deal. If anything major, then they'd fly you to De Nang or something like that. You could first be treated there and then flown out.

BV: Nice to be close to the hospital at least! Have that security. [Laughs.]

JV: [Laughs.] Yes, that helped.

BV: Onto a little bit of a lighter subject. Were there any people that came in like Bob Hope?

JV: Yes, I think there are even some pictures in there. The USO[16], that's the United States Overseas, Bob Hope would come and Ann-Margret was there. They'd bring some girls in, dance on the stage and that kind of stuff. There was the NCO Club, that's non-commisioned officer. That would be for the lower rank, you might say, not the brass[17], the generals, the lieutenants, and that kind of stuff. We had some entertainment occasionally.

BV: How often?

JV: I would say about once a month but it was whether you were around to see it or not. It's actually kind of a small percentage of the people that actually got to see it because everything kept going on whether they were there or not. It's not like the 4th of July holiday where everything shuts down and you can go watch the show. That's not it.

BV: Did they mostly come at night then or just all day?

JV: There was some of each, both day and night. They went from one base to another, so they'd have a show here and last for two hours and move on to the next base and it would be in the afternoon and the next base was at night and start over again the next day. It was a good morale booster.

BV: How often did you get to hear from the US? How often did you receive letters from your family?

JV: A lot of letters. Not only from my wife but then from my parents or brothers or my wife's family or people from the church. So that was good. Sometimes they'd send food. They would send candy for some of the kids over there and that kind of stuff. That was very much appreciated.

BV: Did you ever get letters from school kids?

JV: Yes. I was kind of born and raised around Hospers so I remember getting letters from the kids from the Hospers school and also from the Orange City school here and stuff.

BV: That was pretty cool too?

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[16] The USO is the United Services Organization. Funded privately, the organization aims to support American servicepeople by providing entertainment and other amenities. During the Vietnam War, the USO sponsored more than 5,000 shows for troops (Avant).

[17] Brass is a slang term for high-ranking military leaders.

JV: Yes, that was great. You kind of were, I don't want to say cut off from the other part of the world, but it's not that you, talking on the telephone was out. TV and radio, a little bit of that but not a great deal. You was kind of half cut off from the other part of the world, so when you'd get a letter from home or from kids, it was very much appreciated, it was great.

BV: Did you get to hear a lot about the outside events in those letters, like what was happening in the United States?

JV: Yes, and it depends on who you were getting it from. Kids, they'd tell you about their stuff, and parents would tell you about their stuff and then sometimes they would ask questions. "I heard this happened over there, is that true?" This kind of stuff. There's such a long span between, sometimes it'd be two weeks from the time they wrote the letter until the time you got it. Wherever it all went here, but once it got to Vietnam, probably flew into Da Nang and be there for so many days before it got to Phu Cat and then you wouldn't have mail call every day. Probably every third day or something you'd have a mail call. Also sometimes you weren't around when there was mail call. It's not like you go to the post office and look in your box. Sometimes they would send cookies or that kind of stuff, but it wasn't always in the best of shape when you got it.

BV: It's the thought that counts right?

JV: Yes, that's it. Even if the cookie was broke in 10 pieces, it was still good.

BV: Eat the crumbs [Laughs]

JV: [Laughs] Right.

BV: Describe coming home. What was that like?

JV: Well, it was great. It was absolutely great. You had a short timers calendar, they called it. So it was 100 days on the picture, filled in a day, and then I suppose about two days before you could actually leave, you started discharging yourself from that base and turning in different things. From the time you left there, you landed different places and course you always got delayed here and there but finally we did land in Washington and I could call Judy and say this is the approximate time and we landed in Sioux City. There was quite a group of us that landed in Sioux City. That was about 2 o'clock in the morning but it was great. It was a pretty good feeling to be out of there and done with it.

BV: Did you get to leave on time? I know some people had to stay a little bit longer.

JV: No, my orders were pretty much right on time. Pretty close to exactly one year. That's what it was when I got my orders to go. I think, just guessing, May 5 to May 7 or something like that.

BV: Pretty perfect!

JV: Yes, I couldn't complain on that.

BV: Did you stop, have any stops with the plane before you got into Sioux City?

JV: Yes, we stopped quite often coming across the ocean. It was kind of like going out there, on different islands.

BV: Did you come back on the cargo plane?

JV: No, we had a passenger plane. No stewardess or anything like that, but we had a passenger plane where we could sit. It was a military plane. It was better than going out there. Yes, it was good.

BV: How were you received when you came back? You came back at basically the height of the…

JV: Yes, '69. We was received good. There was quite a crowd of people in Sioux City when we landed. No protesters or negative like that, not that we saw. There was some of that around and all that. There was a lot of people that protested the war. I have my feelings about that too. We was received well.

BV: What were your feelings about the protesters?

JV: Well, I can see both sides to it because it's just like the Iraq war. Should we be there or should we just pull out and come home? We was there for quite a few years and what did we accomplish? Still on the other hand, the protesters, I don't think they should be protesting against the men that are sent over there and come back. It's not their choice to go there. They're just doing what the government wants, it's in the line of duty, that kind of stuff. Why protest against those men too yet? There are some of those guys that went through a lot, wounded and everything else. You come home and the protesters are mocking you too yet. I don't think that's called for. On the other hand, I can see the part of "Why are we there? What good are we doing there? Are we doing good?" and that type of thing.

BV: Do you have any answers for those questions? Like why we were there, any speculation at all? What good we were doing?

JV: I guess for one thing, you're fighting there instead of on our home ground. I'd hate to see that kind of a war in the United States. Like in Iraq and Vietnam, what these ordinary people have to go through day after day with bombs dropping and suicide

car bombs and that kind of stuff. Every day you wake up to the same thing which would be terrible, just absolutely…you don't know from day to day if your family is safe or not safe. You send your kids to school, is there going to be a bomb in school? You can be thankful that it's there and not here. Is that what we're doing? Are we fighting there to keep the United States safe? Keep it from coming here? Is there answers for that? Is that the answer or not, or is it all political? What is your feelings?

BV: Kind of a second-hand perspective, but it's such a long war and the reasons for getting involved, France occupied it before and the United States just kind of took over.

JV: A couple weeks ago there was a travelogue in Sioux Center at Dordt College. Did you happen to go to that?

BV: I didn't.

JV: That was on Vietnam. Vietnam actually has come a long, long ways. They say in five years that'll be one of the most popular tourist place for the Americans to go.

BV: Because of the Vietnam War?

J:V Because of the Vietnam War, but the hotels and motels and resorts and so on. It's just like in the United States. The pictures that we saw the other night, it doesn't look like Vietnam at all. So they have come a long ways in the last 30 years. According to that travelogue, it's getting to be a very rich country. It used to be nothing but poverty.

BV: Peasants.

JV: Yes, and it's communist, but that is on the way out, according to that travelogue. The older politicians are communists but as they are dying off, it's getting less and less. It's getting to be more like the United States, more democrat.

BV: Do you think you'll ever go back there? Or visit at all?

JV: I hope to. I've been saying that for quite a few years. The only thing, it's very expensive to fly that far. I would like to take my wife and go back. The only thing from what I saw the other night, I wouldn't recognize a thing of Vietnam from the way it is. I could go to this city, I don't know if the air bases are there anymore or not. It'd be basically like just going to different country because the buildings and the resorts and all that, what they have there now, there was nothing there when we was there.

BV: I hear they have a lot of monuments and stuff, it might be really neat to go to.

JV: Yes, and there is tours. You can go on a tour and they will take you to the area where you were at. You can say there's 20 vets that go, that probably spend one day at the area where you're at, the next day spend the day where the next person was at. It would be very interesting, I would love to do it, but I don't know if I will get there or not.

BV: It would be really awesome.

JV: It would be.

BV: You brought up earlier how Vietnam did end up becoming communist. How does that fit in with your perception of the purpose of the war?

JV: I guess, we lost the war. All the years that we fought there, finally we did pull out, and the communists took over. It seemed like after we pulled out, it kind of all settled down and no more fighting and so that really makes you wonder why you're fighting. The same thing with Iraq, should we pull out now?

BV: Do you think it would be the same situation?

JV: I'd say a good possibility. If you just look back at the Vietnam War, maybe the same thing would happen there.

BV: They have a lot of ties between those two wars. It's kind of amazing.

JV; Yes, it is. So, it's a big question. You probably won't find the answer out until you try it. The Democrats talk about 2008, pulling out. Maybe that's good. You really won't know until after you tried it this way or that way.

BV: It's starting to turn into a long and protested war too. It's been 6 years now.

JV: Yes.

BV: Let's see. How do you feel about how the Vietnam War is represented in media today? Movies or just how it's talked about, Internet?

JV: Well, I never go to a movie to see it, I know that.

BV: Have you seen any of them?

JV: No

BV: Why not?

JV: I got enough memories. I don't think they should make any movies out of anything like that. What are you trying to do, lighten it or make it worse? It's no game. If a person likes to see that kind of stuff, don't tie a war in with it. Just my feelings.

BV: Do you think some of them help at all for the younger generation, like my generation, to help understand the war at all? Or the soldiers' perspective on the war?

JV: I don't think so. At least I assume it depends on the movie but if you really tell a true story about the war without bringing in the fighting and the bombing that'd be one thing, but it seems like nowadays you have to have so much shooting and killing and blood and that kind of stuff. I don't think that's right.

BV: How do you feel about the Internet? There's a lot of sites where vets have gone on and told the history about the war, their experiences? Have you looked at any of that?

JV: No, I don't. I try to stay away from it.

BV: I'm assuming that you didn't get involved in any veteran things?

JV: I belong to the American Legion[18] and that kind of stuff. I participate in that regularly. No, I have nothing against any of that, and as far as telling your part of it or your duty that you did there, that's fine. Not that you can't talk about it. I just don't want it blown out of proportion and you might say bragging about what you did there and that kind of stuff. I don't think that's right.

BV: Some have been found to exaggerate their stories a little bit.

JV: This winter we went to Hawaii for a few weeks, then we were sitting around the swimming pool and talking with this one couple and this guy found out that I was in Vietnam. He was in Vietnam, and he talked about that they had to drill holes in the bottom of the helicopter to let the blood out and that kind of stuff. I don't think you have to bring that up and talk about that and brag about it and whatever he was doing. I don't think that's right myself.

BV: Do you more prefer memoirs or journals? Personal journals to help process? Have you ever tried that?

JV: No, not really. I just kind of keep it to myself whatever happened and what didn't happen and go on from there.

BV: Did you ever share it with your family? Mostly through the photos?

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[18] The American Legion is the world's largest veterans' organization. Many towns have local posts (Ohlbrich and Ross).

JV: Yes, just through the photos.

BV: Let's see. I believe that is it.

JV: Great.

BV: Thank you

JV: Yes.

Audio recorder was apparently turned off for a bit, then turned back on as Van Kalsbeek showed the interviewer some photos.

JV: This is a plane that we flew over with, a cargo plane.

This is a plane that I would fly the money back and forth.

This is a gun that had the guns out the side. It had three guns and it was in a revolving deal like this. If it would fly over a football field, every square foot would have a bullet hole. That's how many bullets…

BV: Pretty effective.

JV: Yes, some more planes. Here is kind of an aerial view.

BV: That is big, is that all back there too?

JV: Our bunkers would be way out here and out here like this.

JV: Here is a security police. This would be my dorm where I stayed for the year. A few of the helicopters. Just here's some Vietnamese that are working. Here is just a part of our base. This is actually our chapel, our church.

BV: It looks pretty big.

JV: Yes, it was a nice chapel.

BV: Did you have service every Sunday?

JV: Yes, the Catholics in the morning. We shared the whole chapel. This would be like a tower we'd sit in. That was up high, that would be at the airport.

BV: How tall was that?

JV: This was probably like 50 feet, this was more like 200 feet.

BV: Whoa, was it hard to see people?

JV: We had scopes. We had a starlight scope which would light things up at night. You'd look through there and see at night, which was very hard on your eyes.

BV: Like the early version of night vision goggles?

JV: Yes, I would say so.

BV: Was it hard to come out from looking at that?

JV: Yes, if you look through there for 30 seconds, then you should really stop because you could really strain your eyes.

BV: Did they ever come out with newer versions at all?

JV: Yes, later on they did, but not while I was there.

This would be like some of our roving patrol. That was me sitting there with the gun. Then there's also gates where you go through and you'd have to stop when you go through the gate to make sure that you're supposed to be there.

BV: So, the tall towers, were they like the easy, the more preferred jobs?

JV: It was, the only thing you was a real sitting target up there. If they started to get fired upon, there was really no place to go.

BV: And no place to aim really…

JV: For the Vietcong to shoot at you, you're up there.

JV: This would be like our bunkers that we sit in on the ground. You have your machine gun here, machine gun, machine gun.

This is steel around there and sand bags. It's a lot bigger than what you see there. The only thing is, you're up there, you're there, there's really no…

Canine dogs.

BV: Like smelling dogs?

JV: Yes. They would be, like here's the fences they put up with the flares, but then the dogs would be on the other side there. The people would walk the dogs up and down.

BV: Could they attack then too?

JV: Yes, they could attack, but basically they could really smell. If they smelled anything, that'd really alert the people.

BV: You can really see where they cut off the foliage there.

JV: Yes. And see like this here fence we'd set up here-this concertina fence-they'd have flares here so if the Vietcong would come and try to sneak through here, they would bump a wire and would hit and set the fire off.

BV: So you know where to aim?

JV: Yes, you knew when a flare went off, there was something there. Whether it was a dog or a person or whatever it may be, you knew there was something there. That's when you would take the machine gun and just fire.

BV: In the morning did you have to clean up at all?

JV: Yes.

BV: That was part of the job then?

JV: Yes, you would go out and see what was there. Here is just building and fixing. Here this is all bombs

BV: Whoa, that's a lot.

JV: Yes, so you can see this is all different dumps.

BV: That's where the gas and the oil?

JV: Yes, the gas and oil and bombs. There'd just some pictures of the terrain, mountains in the background. Here's some rice paddies here, getting closer to harvest. Here's more bunkers here.

BV: I heard it's so green over there.

JV: Yes it was. For one thing you had a lot of rain. Like here's a rice paddies. This is a different time, you can see the water in them, so at night you'd walk through there. Here's all the people coming on base to work.

BV: Do they have to pass through, it looks like?

JV: Yes, there's an inspection point there.

BV: Looking for weapons?

JV: Anything that they carry that wasn't supposed to be-and going out too. Not just coming in, but going out, they look to see if they were stealing anything from the base or anything like that.

So here'd be a river and there's their water buffalo, what they would till the ground with, stuff like that.

Here's the real means of transportation there.

BV: Did you ever get to do those?

JV: Oh yes. If we would go to the town like the day you'd have off, or you'd take a truck to town but then you'd walk through town. They'd pick you up and give you a ride for like a quarter or something like that, from one part of the town to the other.

JV: And here's basically homes. That's what their homes looked like.

BV: Little.

JV: Yes, just shacks. All of this here.

BV: Grass roof and…

JV: Here's part of the town, little kids.

BV: Did you ever get a chance to make it into Saigon or anything?

JV: Saigon and Da Nang. Those were the two biggest cities, and Qui Nhon was the third biggest city.

BV: What was it like there?

JV: Like this. This was their homes. There's a lady selling rice.

BV: I've heard that Saigon is a lot like a French province[19], like the most architecturally advanced…

JV: Yes, they had a lot of nice buildings there. A lot of them had been hit. There's a lot of ruined stuff around. That's why the other night at that travel log I just couldn't believe that that was the same country, you know.

BV: They rebuilt it so much?

[19] Saigon was conquered by France in 1861, then occupied by that country into the middle of the 20th century (Gendzel).

JV: Resorts and all like you have in Florida. Here's a typical home like that. That's just other homes. Here's a bike accident. They basically didn't have much for cars or anything like that. Mopeds…

BV: Just like the jeeps the Americans brought?

JV: That's about all that they had. Mopeds like that, and bikes likes that. And so…[indicates another photo] little kid smoking.

BV: Did you have a lot of contacts with children?

JV: Yes, I did. Well here's three little kids I got to know.

BV: Did they come on the base with their parents when they worked?

JV: That's just a different picture. That doesn't quite look like me anymore, does it?

BV: [Laughs.] A younger you.

JV: There's a guy that I got to know real well, and that was his three kids. Here's just a home that I took a picture of. That's some barracks there.

BV: So was that for one person or was there another person on the other side?

JV: Eight people we had in that room, and probably about the size of your rooms like that but there's eight people in them.

BV: So like twenty by twenty maybe?

JV: Yeah, that'd be about right. Double bunks, and just a bunch of little kids that… I really don't know why I took all these pictures.

BV: For memories. [Looks at more pictures, chuckling at one.] …All gussied up! Sort of.

JV: Yes, that's how we'd go out at night.

BV: A lot of ammo.

JV: They called it a chain-link machine gun. So you'd put it in and pull the trigger, and it'd feed itself.

BV: So all you would have is a helmet and shells and a gun?

JV: Yes, that's about it.

BV: Wow. Wow.

JV: There's some of the guys that worked for me the last couple of months. Just playing games here to see who was fast and who was slow. And here they are working. Setting poles and setting fences and stuff like that. Here's the South China Sea.

BV: Did you ever get to go out on it?

JV: Yes. I was there a couple times just out on the beach for a day or so.

BV: Is that what you did on the days off?

JV: At least first, you tried to go look around different places or cities. Stuff like that. And then after you'd been there a few times or so, then there wasn't much to do there anymore. But yes, here's the South China Sea. And you could spend on the beach or something like that, just to get away from things.

I was 145 pounds when I came home.

BV: Wow, how much did you weigh when you went over?

JV: About 200.

BV: Was the food very good or was it just stress, work, heat?

JV: It wasn't too bad. It was very edible—that's not it— it was just the long days and short nights and the heat. Actually it was the other way around, the short days and the long nights. If you had three, four, five hours of sleep a day that was great. And then the hundred degree temperature…

BV: Sweat it all out.

JV: Yes, that's it. So here's just a bunch of kids that when they send candy or something like that, then you give it to the kids. Actually, it was a good morale booster, the candy, in honor of the kids and just to intermingling. Somebody must have sent a doll and colors. Because you felt sorry for them little kids; a lot of them didn't have a father or mother.

BV: Did you ever get a perception of how they felt about the war?

JV: Yes, the most of them didn't like it. For some of them, it was a pretty good income boost. They could work for the Americans. They made a lot of money off the American, but a lot of them lost their lives too, you know. Or they lost their loved ones. Not that they liked it, but in a certain sense, it was good for some families, bad for other ones.

BV: It kind of helped them today too. As sad and weird as it is… like with the economy now and tourism. There's something good about it.

JV: Yes, a lot of them…here's some of the Bob Hope show.

BV: [Indicates a person's clothes in another photo.] Lime green!

JV: What?

BV: Lime green!

JV: Well, maybe forty years ago that was in. I don't know! Let's see, what was I going to say… A lot of the Vietnamese that came over after the war was over. They did real well in the United States, and they are sending money back to Vietnam and building things back there and investing their money and that's why the country is actually doing so well now.

BV: And sending money back.

JV: Because the Vietnamese came here and made it big here and now they're doing well there.

BV: Wow.

JV: This was all shows during the daytime. And here you can see there was a pretty good crowd there.

BV: Holy cow, even up there.

JV: Yes, they'd do most anything to see a female after they'd been gone so long.

BV: I'm sure. Did you even have nurses or anything?

JV: Not a great deal, no. Not like now. Now there's a lot of females in the service, but in those days there wasn't. Very, very seldomly you'd see a female in the service.

BV: So they were very excited when—[laughs].

JV: Yes, right! That's exactly right.

BV: What are these buildings here?

JV: I really don't know. I think I took them out of the helicopter, so I really don't know. There's a few statues, here's where a bomb went off and here's where they blew a bridge up. This is where they did most of their washing. The Vietnamese would

pick up our uniforms and take them to the river to wash them and then bring them back.

BV: [Indicates burnt ground in a photo.] So the bombs?

JV: Yes, it looks like that's been burnt off, or the Agent Orange must have been… A lot of this stuff is forty years old. I don't remember no more literally, why I took some of these pictures.

This must have been when we was either coming back or going out there. That's a pretty big jet the way it looks. And here's some more. Looks like there's some mortar landed there or something, some smoke.

BV: What is this?

JV: They must have had a carnival one time. I think it was for an orphanage, to make money for the orphanage. You can see we're playing games and that kind of stuff and I think the orphans came and… That's things probably on a Sunday or something like that, just had a bunch of kids down to entertain them. That's what really suffered the most—the kids. The father was gone, and the mothers had to work.

BV: You can see why you made the comment that life "was cheap over there." I can see why they had nothing.

JV: Yes, anything for a dollar. That's what it amounted to—how to make a dollar. Another thing that was really popular was prostitution. It was so bad over there and you know, anything to make ten dollars.

BV: Is that mostly in the cities then?

JV: Yes. …And there I am, even get a haircut from one of the papasans[20]. This was his three kids.

BV: Are those the same kids that—

JV: Yeah, I got to know some of them people and kids pretty well, and then he would send some candy and colors and toys, some of that kind of stuff. Those kids were overwhelmed with that.

BV: I bet they loved it.

JV: Yes, they did. [Pause, as if to conclude.] Ok.

BV: Ok.

[20] A slang term for older Vietnamese or East Asian men.

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